

## Letter from Mabel Hubbard Bell to Alexander Graham Bell, December 10, 1893, with transcript

Letter from Mrs. Alexander Graham Bell to Dr. Alexander Graham Bell. GILSEY HOUSE, NEW YORK. Dec. 10th 1893. My dear Alec:

I was so glad to find your telegram awaiting me although it was only on business, it was dismal coming here all alone and finding no one to greet me or send me a message.

I think the slab sidewalk to the wharf might be nice. I would like to have it put down so that it can be taken up in the spring. That you remember is what we did in Cambridge in the winter. I think also that the stone steps ought to be covered. I don't know why though, except that it is always done in every Northern city, and I suppose there must be some good reason for it. Is any one taking care of my plants? I offered Mrs. Kennan my joss flowers after you left as otherwise they will bloom unseen, and that would be a pity.

How are you going to manage about the launch now? Tomorrow is the last day of hire?

I have just been down to the office and found Mr. Pierson's address in the directory and am going to try and summon up courage to drive there. I want to see him and hear about Pierson and Sara. Don't you think it time that you gave that poor boy his watch? He has been waiting two years for it now.

I didn't telegraph the Gilsey for rooms, but nevertheless was shown into the biggest room with parlor attached, this I declined, but accepted another room on the same floor. I feel decidedly wanting in moral courage, but that's nothing new, however Rose and I had only two meals yesterday, and if I have three today one will be very small! I spent a lot of money yesterday, but really I haven't been very extravagant except thrice and I wish I hadn't now, that I have read Life's "Christmas Sermon". I can't help it, we must

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give presents, but they needn't be expensive ones. I think there is something wrong somewhere, but the more seriously I think about it, the less convinced am I that you look at it in the right way. I think the true way is to admit that the custom of Christmas present giving is right and true and has its foundations in the human heart, and cannot be done away with without freezing the heart. I know a few people beside yourself who act upon your theory and will accept no presents, and I tell you that I do not feel one bit more kindly towards them, on the contrary I feel more coldly and less inclined to feel friendly towards them the year through, and I feel the same way too towards you. You chill me, and because I can't do anything for you therefore in a degree I love you less. For what is the element of loving but the doing of things for the loved one. Love to exist must express itself, and it is increased the more ways it finds to express itself. Christmas is the time when one thinks of one's friends, the time when by old usage one is prompted to show ones love for them by doing something for them. By this act the love is increased, the heart is enlarged. It is all very well to say. Help your poor neighbor who needs a present, do not give to your rich relation who needs none, but after all the very foundations of Society rests upon the love of one relation to another, and that love must be encouraged in every way, if for no other reason than to keep society together. Now what I think is the true way to look upon it is to encourage the gifts of friends to each other, and also to encourage the giving to the poor. To admit that the principle is right in itself, but that like every other thing in this world, right principles included, it is capable of abuse. That the right and praiseworthy habit of Christmas present giving has attained proportions that should be condemned and checked. But to do away altogether with the habit is not the right way to do it. It is like cutting down a beautiful vine that has attained a too rank and luxuriant growth and leave nothing in its place, unless perchance weeds spring up and disfigure a place that had been beautiful. For that vine had deep roots below the soil, and there is place for no other tree there until you have dug deep into the soil and pulled up the roots and worked over it, and planted a new seed, with new fertilizers all of which is a process taking much time and labor and the passing of many years, during which the gardener may die. How much easier and better just to trim your too luxuriant vine. It's

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very beautiful when kept within proper limits. Well! — I know talking will not alter your convictions, but I wish you realized how they lie with a very heavy weight upon me, and without convincing me yet destroy all my pleasure. If I felt that my own soul and that of my children profited by the destruction of this pleasure I would care less, but I know that it is injurious in its effects on my better nature. You say I am cold of heart, I tell you this tends to make me a thousand fold more so. Open your purse to one you love, and when you see the pinched, sad face of poverty it stays open until you have helped brightened that also, resolutely shut your purse and heart against one you love, the chances are it remains shut to the other 4 also. Oh Alec dear, if you could only admit the principle and smile on the innocent pleasure of your children and friends in giving and receiving, and only discourage extravagance in both, how I would go with you heart and soul and rejoice in being one with you, and not separated as we are in too many things. I have tried my best to conform to your wishes and as I say and have said, the vine needs trimming, but the principle I know is right. What I would like would be to be hampered with no vexatious restrictions, but simply to bear the general principle in mind not to be extravagant in giving and think that because it is Christmas I must give an expensive present. I would like to remember as many of my friends as possible by some little gift, and give a big one when there is something I happen to know a dear one wants or needs, and for the rest give mostly to some poor people whom I know personally. Now for instance I don't know a thing Mamma or Grace want, or their children, I want to give them each some pretty dainty little thing that doesn't cost much and yet shows my love and thoug ht of them, and I want to have a dress made for that poor Susie Hesen down in Virginia who we have been so hard upon, why, I scarcely could tell now. I have gone I admit to the extravagance of buying Mamma a plush carriage robe, which cost sixty dollars, but then I wanted her to have it so awfully much, not because it was Christmas, but because it seemed to me so appropriate for her, what I wanted to wrap her up in. I didn't think you could object to that feeling. Then I want to give those children of Dr. Radcliffe's something very nice because I loved their father very dearly, I have neglected them shamefully all these years chiefly, my dear, because your Christmas 5 ideas chilled my heart.. No — no, a thousand times, No. I am right and

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you are wrong. All the rest of the year one is absorbed in ones own affairs, and what can be done any time will never be done, at Christmas thought of others is obligatory and if one has to do something for them one thinks of them, thinks of all the kindly deeds of the past, and so thinking remembers many another friend, and the heart is opened and warmed until it embraces all mankind. Shut it against, the one who stands nearest the door, how can you open it to the world without pushing that one aside and how can you go with a happy heart which a clear conscience to the relief of the world when you remember your rudeness to that nearest one?

There — Will you read all this stuff. Well it all means I love you and nothing hurts me so as to feel this barrier of different feelings between us.

Goodbye, Your Mabel.

You say you will take presents made for you, but that does not help the matter one bit. It is the love behind the gift that makes its value, and which may be as good as great with an expensive bought gift as with a made one, and what is more like love than to seek to see what the loved one needs and desire to satisfy that need. "If Papa needs an inkstand badly why must I make him a book-mark which he doesn't need when I can buy the inkstand? and my time would be better employed in doing something else?" Again why should I spend my time doing a thing badly when somebody else can do it well and would be so thankful for the money. Isn't it better for me to 6 spend that money give Papa something that he wants and is good of its kind and at the same time help a poor creature over a tight place?" Again I say No restrictions, but no extravagance that I condemn. Let me open my heart to the one nearest my own, and it will go hard but I catch a glimpse of other faces beyond and my heart's door flings wide open to embrace them all, close my heart to my dearest, and the effort is so great that it has to be slammed to, locked and double locked so that I can't open it.